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On the System of Registration in the United States of America.

By JOSIAH CURTIS, M.D.

[Read before the Statistical Society, 19th December, 1853.]

THE idea of making authentic records of births, marriages, and deaths, has been operative, in a very inefficient manner, however, in many states of the Union for a long series of years. But it was not until quite recently that anything like a systematic arrangement has been adopted by legal enactments. Soon after the passage of the English Registration Act, in 1837, the subject received more attention, especially in the state of Massachusetts. This state passed a registration law, modelled somewhat after the English Act, in May, 1842. This law was modified in March, 1844, and still further improved by the Act of May, 1849.

Under this law, ten official annual reports have been made to the legislature of Massachusetts. This has been an example to other states in the confederacy, as follows:—The state of New York passed a law similar to that of Massachusetts, in April, 1847. Two state reports were made, one in April, 1848, and the other in April, 1849. Since then, no reports have been made, and the law has become quite inefficient. Several attempts have been made by the friends of the law to make it more effectual; while the opponents of the measure have tried to obtain its repeal. A motion to repeal it was lost at the last session of the legislature, by a vote of nearly two to one; while a motion to render it more effective, especially so far as it applies to the city of New York, was successful. It has many strong and influential advocates, and it is confidently expected that soon the law will be in full force.

The state of New Jersey passed a registration law in March, 1848, and remodelled it, with improvements, in March, 1851. Two annual reports have been made, bearing date respectively February, 1852 and 1853, and a third report is now nearly ready.

Connecticut passed their law on this subject in June, 1848. Three annual reports have appeared, the last bearing date May, 1852. No report was submitted to the legislature of that state during this year; but the law is in the hands of an efficient committee of the legislature for modification and perfection, to be submitted to the action of the legislature in May next.

New Hampshire enacted a law in July, 1849, and modified it with improvements in July, 1851. No reports are required by the Act.

Rhode Island established a law in 1849, which was very much improved last year, and the first report is now in the press.

Pennsylvania passed an Act in April, 1851, but it did not receive the signature of the governor of that state, and therefore did not become a law, until January, 1852.

Kentucky passed a law in January, 1852, and in due season will furnish valuable reports.

Virginia created a registration law on the last night of the last session of her legislature.

The subject is agitated in other states, and in one—namely, South Carolina—it has been brought to the notice of the legislature during each of the last five years; and I am assured, in a communication

from Dr. T. Y. Simon, of the city of Charleston, who is chairman of the Medical Board, that it shall continue to be urged upon the attention of that body every year until successful, unless death shall suspend his zeal and labours in behalf of such a measure.

The importance of a systematic and scientific registration universally receives the sanction and advocacy of the leading medical men of our country; but, unfortunately, its utility is not seen by the mere politician. An example is seen in the fact that the laws of Rhode Island and Kentucky are largely due to the efforts of Dr. J. Mauran, of Providence, and Dr. W. L. Sutton, of Georgetown, who are respectively the presidents of the medical societies of those states; while in Pennsylvania, the executive chief withheld his sanction to the Act after it had passed the legislature of that state, and it became a law only by a provision of their constitution, which makes an Act a law if not vetoed, with reasons for the governor's objections, prior to the tenth day of the next convening of the legislative body. In this case, that body manifested their approval of the enactment by confirming it with a handsome special appropriation from the state funds to put it into successful operation.

In Massachusetts, the law was obtained in compliance with petitions from the American Statistical Association, the Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the State Medical Society. Their ten reports exhibit results quite analogous to those of England in many particulars.

The population of this state was in 1850 a little less than a million, being 994,514. The increase from 1840 was 256,814, being 34·81 per cent. on the population of 1840. In the counties of Middlesex (which includes the city of Lowell,) and Suffolk, in which the city of Boston is located, the increase of population during the decade was over 50 per cent. on that of 1840; much of this is due to immigration. In 1830, only 1·58 per cent. of the population of the state was of foreign origin; in 1840, it arose to 4·72 per cent.; and in 1850, it amounted to 16·54 per cent., or one-sixth of the inhabitants.

During the three years 1849-1851 inclusive, there was an annual average of 1 birth to 36 inhabitants, according to the census of 1850; while during five years, 1839-1843, there was annually 1 birth in 31 inhabitants in England, 1 in 35 in France, and 1 in 26 in Prussia and Austria.

Of marriages, I perceive that in England about 8 per cent. of the males, and a little over 13 per cent. of the females, are under 21 years of age. In Massachusetts, at the time of marriage, only 1·66 per cent. of the males, and 24·40 per cent. of the females, are under 20 years of age; and of all marriages in that state, among the females, nearly three-fourths are under the age of 25 years. Taking the same periods of time as above for the births in the several localities, and we have an annual marriage to every 102 inhabitants of Massachusetts, and 1 to 130 in England, 1 to 123 in France and Austria, and 1 to 110 in Prussia.

The proportion of deaths to the population in Massachusetts is not far from 1 in 52·25, or 1·91 per cent. This rate is not equally distributed over the territory, but is severe in proportion to the density of population.
